

white marble stairway, where, if we were lucky we could have a few winks of sleep on our hard narrow cots, before signing off in the morning. No doubt my dreams would include the Duke and Duchess of Kent who had once lived in this building, and would picture them in full dress, sweeping down the gorgeous stairway overhead, which now protected us from any stray doodle bugs that might come our way. The fly bombs seemed to follow me, even when I left London.

On the way to the station I passed the Gaurds Chapel, where I could see the rescue squad digging in the debris, still working furiously to locate any sign of life. It had been a direct hit during a Sunday morning service. Many of the congregation were killed instantly and included a young St. John Ambulance officer I had met the day before at Lady Mountbatten's office. Only her shoes and purse had been found, yet the minister giving the sermon remained unscathed as he stood in front of the Altar which was entirely demolished.

Later, news on the radio mentioned a near miss at the Victoria Station, one hour before boarding my train.

It brought back to mind an old Presbyterian belief that I had heard quoted by both Tait and my mother, that "The Lord will take you when he wants you and not one moment before". This seemed to be true on numerous occasions. This time it made me quite happy to be "unwanted".

My destination was Basingstoke, a small town in Hampshire, well known to many Canadians stationed nearby. It also was a hospital centre for neurological cases and miraculous plastic work. In one of these, my brother



had been a casualty patient and recovered in time to catch up with his unit as it left on it's way for the invasion of Italy.

The train was met by a smartly dressed English girl named Chris, who drove the ambulance, which I noticed was acknowledged as a gift from the American Red Cross. We drove through country lanes and hedgerows to turn in at an uphill winding road, go through a maze of formal trimmed hedges to arrive in front of a huge red brick mansion, whose white trim glistened in the sunlight. This unexpectedly gorgeous home, owned by an American was presented on loan for the duration, to be used as an Auxiliary Convalescent Hospital.

Having been built by an American, it had an abundance of bathrooms minus the out-door pipes to the ground. Fireplaces were still plentiful and enjoyed by the patients. The building could accommodate a hundred casualties and there were few bed-patients.

One of the latter deserves special mention. He was a very young paratrooper, shot down, and the sole survivor of his crew. He now was a double amputee, with severe burns to his head and body. His regimental beret was worn at all times and at the usual jaunty angle to disguise his lack of hair. Just below it shone a pair of sparkling blue eyes which immediately caught your attention in time to see the ever-ready infectious smile that showed his perfect teeth, snow-white in contrast to the healing scar tissue, now in shades of hot pink. Everyone called him "Pinky" which he accepted with the good humour along with his great will to live and recover. It not only enhanced his own courageous spirit and personality,



but seemed to spread throughout the hospital.

How like Tait's message in his book "Reclaiming the Maimed", written during World War One. Exercise and therapy could do wonders, but it must be combined with sheer determination and the will to progress.

The power and influence of "Pinky" permeated the wards. He became one of the most popular lads in the hospital. He made friends easily and the staff were jubilant over his accomplishments. These he shared by lending his only hand to others when they needed it most.

The patients treated the building as they would their own home. There were signs printed asking their respect, which was diligently given, yet allowed for great freedom.

The drawing room was used as a lounge and for recreation programs. A large portrait of a very beautiful woman hung on the main wall. Her flowing dark velvet gown was cleverly draped in folds that clung to her slight figure. She was the home owner's wife, and her eyes showed great depth and compassion as they held the gaze of wounded lads who looked to her for comfort. They knew she cared, as she had made it possible for them to recover their shattered bodies quickly in a homey atmosphere away from the horrors of war.

As they looked out the window at her lovely garden, it was only an intense survey would notice that the colourful flowers shared the soil with the vegetables grown for the need of the patients. The summer house patio became a therapy room, and croquet hooks studded the lawn.

In charge of this smooth running auxiliary hospital was Lady Portsmouth,



a young attractive matron, whose lovely complexion and appealing smile radiated a country freshness before she even spoke.

As I presented my credentials, her smile changed to concern. "I am so sorry Miss Pitt, there has been a mistake made. You are a well qualified nursing officer, but my need is for a domestic." While this startled me as well, it was only for an instant as I quickly replied, "but you do need help at once and I would be glad to fill in until a replacement is found".

Her face beamed as Canadian stocks were on the rise. "I do sincerely appreciate your offer, and accept at once". I was then provided with a fireplace bedroom and bathroom which I hadn't realized existed in England. No hotel could be better.

Apparently my needed service was satisfactory.

I learned to repair shirt collars, cuffs and pajamas. Clean brass, polish furniture and sweep with care. However, having been familiar with administration, it was not long until I found the patients seemed to enjoy taking on many of these duties, in exchange for learning some of my Canadian Service Canteen songs I had picked up at #100 Adelaide St. East in Toronto. The "Desparade" became a favourite at Moundsmere, as well as a lead song in the Canadian Service. I also found they enjoyed dancing programs, even enclosed in awkward casts as they danced "The Big Apple", Lambeth Walk and Boops-a-daisy just as enthusiastically as the boys at home.

It was no wonder Lady Portsmouth was proud of her staff. The cooks, nurses, housekeepers and drivers, were mostly university graduates and business women, all working unceasingly to end the holocaust which had been thrust upon them. They gave their time, effort and service whole-heartedly



in the hope the war would soon be ended.

While this all happened in 1944, it wasn't until twenty-eight years later that I returned to Basingstoke. I was anxious for my husband to see the extraordinary American home that had provided so much help to war casualties of the last war. While I could only say I had been a "domestic" there, I had a special letter of thanks from Lady Portsmouth for helping her so much during a time of great need. It had all proved most worthwhile.

We first stopped for lunch at the Wheatsheaf Inn as we arrived in Basingstoke. It had been highly patronized by the Canadian army lads, and still served delicious steak and kidney pies.

Upon inquiry, no one had heard of, or remembered the Maundsmere Auxiliary Hospital, even after all it's war service. However, we found Lady Portsmouth still dropped in for their specialty dishes and her attorney had just left from the next table. It was advised that we call her Estate's office and the manager there could answer all our inquiries.

Following the usual hassle in an English phone booth, we found the manager Archie Rowland to be the helpful person we needed, and he invited us to come immediately to the office and supplied explicit directions to reach it.

We tackled the motor-way, roundabouts, and surprised ourselves by easily finding the office location. It was in an English country farm building, heavily paneled inside. Archie's office was laden with books, yet in meticulous order. He greeted us warmly saying he regretted Lady Portsmouth had just left for London, but that he would be glad to answer inquiries and give us a personal tour of the estates.



While he was busy for a time, we were given a key to the old Portsmouth family church, where their families had been buried for centuries. We found the church in the middle of a pastoral scene. Knarled trees still spread their branched arms upward, as if to provide protection to the aged stone church as the years sped by. A rugged fence was placed around the church to keep the friendly cattle from attempting to enter the sacred precincts. The sheep also grazed nearby providing the complete country setting which invited numerous artists to the spot. While easels were placed in the field, it was found to be most disconcerting when cows and sheep wandered over to gaze critically at their canvas, and often caused them to pack up hurriedly, make their way over the stile and quickly disappear along the pathway.

However, all was peaceful inside the church. The sunlight filtered through the coloured glass windows to form patterns on the flatstone plaques where the Plymouths lay buried. I played the organ softly in tribute to the ghosts of the past surrounding me.

The Plymouth family crest remained above the curved entrance doorway defying all weather and any intruders. The field stone in the square church tower verified the centuries that had passed since the church had been built.

Now joined by Archie, we were taken to tea at his home to meet his charming wife Olive, and see another well planned English garden of roses, a mass of flowers and his neatly arranged vegetable patch. A small attached greenhouse to his home, had helped contribute to his many projects.

We afterwards started our Estate tour and were first introduced to the games warden, who no doubt still found many poachers using the well



stocked streams. He was a tall fine looking man, whom I am sure could easily parry any advances from Lady Chatterly with the greatest of ease. We saw Jack Rabbits as they jumped hither and yon, but the deer and other game remained hidden and unseen as dusk was approaching.

Archie also found us lodgings at an old English Pub in Ovendon. It had a gorgeous garden of autumn flowers in their gayest colourful attire. In contrast the roses had to bloom furiously to attract attention.

Bruce the landlord welcomed us cheerily. Their dining room was famous for food and my husband spied a Toronto friend there who happily endorsed our find.

We then invited Olive and Archie to have dinner with us. The baked trout fresh from the stream nearby was fabulous. The wine chosen to go with it, warmed the new friendship we had made, and we quickly became Archie, Olive, Bess and Bob before the meal was ended.

Early next morning an invitation came from our new friends who wished to drive us further to see the estate villages with their thatched houses and beautiful gardens. We were to have lunch in Winchester and visit the cathedral. It was an unbelievable day. We became trigger happy with our cameras. I felt Hans Anderson could have written more tales about the people living in the quaint old world thatched houses. The whole area fascinated us, and everywhere we felt the warmth of a friendly atmosphere.

The Cathedral architecture and interior overwhelmed us. Nowhere in Britain does the stream of history run stronger and deeper than in Winchester. It was Britain's capital for 300 years when London was still



a small part. William of Wykeham, a 14th. century Bishop was responsible for building the magnificent nave of the Cathedral and the interior is typical of the Gothic use of space.

Stepping outside you find the burial ground where ancient and more modern military soldiers lie buried. One near the cathedral reads:

Here sleeps in peace a Hampshire Grenadier  
Who caught his death by drinking cold small beer  
Soldiers be wise from his untimely fall  
And when yere hot drink Strong or none at all.

Thus ended our historical tour, and was again culminated with another delightful dinner with our friends at the Inn. How strange it was, that Lady Portsmouth had been called to London, and Olive and Archie Rowland had become our solid friends to last through the years to follow.

Tait always stressed the value of friendship which he said would grow in the most surprising places, during peace or wartime.

Our only disappointment was the object of our crusade, to see Moundsmere itself. Next day, we were on our own as we turned into the long winding uphill lane to the hospital. How well I remembered my first ride coming down this slope on an English bicycle with unfamiliar brakes on the handlebars. Unfortunately a horse-drawn hay cart was about to turn on to the road at the same time. I was afraid to try my brakes with the possibility of flying over the bars and into the nearby field. Instead, I screamed my loudest "Look-out, look out! I can't stop" and sped neatly past the horse's nose, as the frantic farmer pulled on the reins with all his might. It



saved the day, just in the nick of time.

We drove through the same manicured hedges now grown to great heights and the circle drive landed us at the familiar main entrance. I could recognize the window above where I had enjoyed my luxurious room with the fireplace.

A large beige Labrador dog sat solidly in front of the open door and growled if I got too close. It was some time until I could wiggle my way to the door bell.

I waited.

No one answered.

Each time I rang, my husband saw a uniformed maid peek discreetly out the window, hidden slightly by the lace curtains.

Still no one came.

The dog then permitted me to walk slowly around the large desolate house to the Rose Garden Terrace in front. It seemed deserted!

The long rows of roses were still profuse - but neglected! The shrubs and hedges were trimmed - but now towering! The long narrow fish ponds grew the same pink water-lilies, but the fish had vanished! I walked over to the high glass doors which had been a beautiful entrance to the recreation drawing-room.

I looked through the uncurtained doors after an unsuccessful hunt for a door bell.

Horrors!

It was like a Hitchcock movie.



The furniture and chairs were covered in sheets and made ghastly forms and figures!

I finally located the large portrait painting of the owner's wife still hanging where it had been admired so much. My intense scrutiny seemed to find that her expressive eyes now looked lonely and desolate as her gaze looked down on the strange dim shrouded statues. Her once gleaming velvet gown had become dull and the folds gave way to the layers of dust which also eradicated the artist's name as if ashamed of the neglect.

I was visibly shaken to have discovered this.

No doodle-bug bomb dropped in the rose garden would have shocked me more. As tears were close at hand, I turned to my husband and grasping his hand, started to rush back to the car. There was still no one to be seen - only voices from somewhere. What on earth had happened?

It was only later, as we said goodbye to Archie that we got the complete story.

The owner's wife had been widowed, and without family connections had slowly grown lonely and ill through the years passing by. Eventually, she gave way to age and became senile and could not cope with house management. Thus, at present, she lived in a nearby cottage as she wanted to stay near the home she loved. There she received the care she required from servants who lived in a portion of the great house.

The hired help tended the gardens and her home.

The farmers looked after the fields.

Their voices were the only sounds around the once magnificent home,





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